

C O N F I D E N T I A L ABUJA 000448

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TAGS: PGOV ASEC KDEM NI

SUBJECT: NIGERIA: LEADING OPPOSITION POLITICIAN KILLED

Classified by Ambassador Howard F. Jeter. Reasons: 1.5 (B & D).

¶1. (U) Leading Nigerian opposition politician Marshall Harry was killed in the early morning hours of March 5. Marshall was a founding member of the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) but split from the group over disputes with President Olusegun Obasanjo and Rivers state Governor Peter Odili. He was recently named the South-South Zonal Vice Chairman in the leading opposition party, the All Nigeria People's Party (ANPP).

¶2. (C) According to one of his aides, Harry arrived in Abuja March 5 from his home in Port Harcourt, Rivers State. That evening he held a meeting with someone from the Buhari presidential campaign organization. Following this meeting, Marshall met with ANPP Chairman Don Etiebet. According to the aide, he made a phone call home between these two meetings and asked whether the police had arrived at his Port Harcourt office. (NOTE: It is possible that he expected to be detained over an attempted political rally in Port Harcourt which Odili had banned. END NOTE.) Following his meeting with Etiebet, he had dinner with an unidentified politician. (NOTE: From the description of one journalist, this politician could be former PDP activist and leading member of the Arewa Consultative Forum Sunday Awoniyi. END NOTE.)

¶3. (C) Figures close to ANPP Presidential candidate Muhammadu Buhari assert that Harry's murder was politically motivated and imply that the ruling PDP had an interest in seeing Harry eliminated, but they stop short of naming names. In April of last year, a lawyer claiming to represent Harry asserted that his client's life was in danger because of his opposition to Odili and sought police protection.

¶4. (C) According to Harry's security guards, at least two men entered his compound at around 3:30 AM, attacked them and tied them up. They then entered the house where they confronted Marshall and his daughter. The daughter says that they offered the attackers money and jewelry to leave, but the men refused. They shot Marshall twice in the abdomen and fled the house. A photograph of the crime scene shows a spartan, linoleum-tiled bedroom with a massive bloodstain near the foot of the bed.

¶5. (C) In a meeting with Ambassador and DCM the morning of the attack, State Security Service Director-General Lateef Kayode Are downplayed the political angle, contending that Harry died as the result of a bungled armed robbery. Harry and Odili actually got along quite well, Are asserted, claiming that Harry was Odili's "mole" in the South-South ANPP.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: Press reports strongly suggest that Harry was targeted. Assuming it was politically motivated, this is the most significant assassination since Justice Minister Bola Ige's murder in December, 2001. Whether the attack was political or criminal, it will be viewed by the political opposition and many Nigerians as an attempt to stifle and frighten the opposition. For their part, the government and ruling party have condemned the murder. This will not account for much unless the police are seen as actively pursuing Harry's killer, something that was not done in Ige's case. With Buhari's presidential campaign due to open in Harry's home town of Port Harcourt on Saturday, the linkage will be inevitable and the event on Saturday perhaps has acquired extra significance due to this tragedy. In any case, the murder of a Vice Chairman of the ANPP will increase political tensions and uncertainty in the run-up to a much-criticized and hotly-contested election process.

JETER